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HISTORICAL BACKGROUND TO 1959 REPORT
ON ENQUIRY INTO SPONTANEOUS CASES

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ON its foundation in 1882 the Society at once began to follow up two lines of enquiry in which substantial progress had already been made by some of the original members. These were the experimental study of 'thought-reading', as the Founders' Manifesto styled telepathy, and the investigation of apparitions and other spontaneous phenomena. Apparitions are among the oldest of human experiences. As embellished by popular tradition and literary artifice they provided the basis for the familiar ghost-story, universally accepted by the western world for centuries, and then almost universally rejected by educated men and women, but in either case without systematic investigation till our Founders undertook the task.

These two lines of enquiry met in the evidence presented in *Phantasms of the Living* (1886) by Edmund Gurney, Frederic Myers and Frank Podmore, the first-named being the principal author. The spontaneous experiences described and discussed were of many varieties; dreams of the death of persons known to the dreamer; visions of recognized persons seen, or their voices heard, when the percipient was awake; experiences of a single percipient; others (known as 'collective') where two or more percipients were involved; and many others. Some were cases reported to the Society before the authors began their work: others were collected for the purpose of the book. All the narratives were submitted to a thorough critical examination by persons who, like the authors, had had previous training in dealing with that type of evidence. Several of the cases were old when reported, and were therefore not capable of full verification.

New cases were obtained by two questionnaires each addressed to over 5,000 persons, who were taken as a fair sample of the population. In one they were asked whether in the previous ten years they had had a dream of the death of some person known to

them, which dream was exceptionally vivid and of which the impression lasted for an hour after they rose. The second asked whether, during the same period, when in good health, free from anxiety, and completely awake — they had had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a human being, or of hearing a voice or sound which suggested a human presence, when no one was there.

There would have been no point in amassing large numbers of narratives of extraordinary events unless with a view to arriving at some general principles as to the conditions governing the different types of experience. To remedy the weaknesses which notoriously affect such narratives, especially defective observation, poor recording and untrustworthy memory, it was necessary to set up standards of evidence. A great, and perhaps the most permanently valuable, part of *Phantasms* is devoted to that object.

One point deserves especial mention as it has been necessary to keep it in mind in enquiring into the greater number of experiences reported to the Society. Where there is any reason to believe that there is a correspondence, which may be significant, between a dream, waking vision, or other experience and some external event not within the normal knowledge or rational inference of the percipient, there are three matters which should be placed beyond reasonable doubt. The first is the nature of the experience, the second the nature of the event, and the third the probability that the event was or was not normally known to or rationally inferable by the percipient at the time of the experience. In many instances complete certainty on the third point may be very difficult to obtain. In others, as for example where there has been a waking vision corresponding to an accident happening at the same time, but at a distance, normal knowledge and rational inference are seldom in question.

In such a case, and in all cases of apparent correspondence, the most essential point is that it should in some way be certain that the percipient had the experience, in all material points as it was reported, before he gained normal knowledge of the event, so that there could be no risk of his narrative having been coloured by the event, after he came to know of it. This risk can best be met by the percipient committing to writing a full note of the experience at the time or immediately after, signing and dating it, and getting an independent person to sign it too, in proof of his having been shown it on a specified date. Other, though inferior ways of meeting the risk are for the percipient, before obtaining normal knowledge of the event, to give a verbal account to an independent witness, or to take some action for which his experience would provide the only reasonable explanation.

The authors recognized that, because of the relative frequency of dreams, it was more difficult to establish a significant connection between them and external events than where waking visions were concerned, and for that reason limited their questionnaire regarding dreams to such as corresponded with a class of event the probable occurrence of which could be measured in a rough and ready way, namely, by the death of a person known to the dreamer.

The authors came to the conclusion that the material before them showed that there was a significant connection between various types of experience and events neither known to the percipient nor rationally to be inferred by him. It is unnecessary here to dwell on their statistics, as this aspect was treated more fully in the larger enquiry shortly to be mentioned. Three views widely held by people who had made no serious study of these experiences were disputed: (1) that the experiences were devoid of purpose or meaning except in so far as they might throw a lurid light on the state of the percipient's mental health; (2) that a quasi-material double of the person or thing perceived was locally present, his 'ghost' in popular language, if the person were dead: (3) that the percipient saw the event as it was occurring by 'clairvoyance', a word that had not at that time acquired any precise meaning. These negative views all three authors accepted for most of the types of case that they had under survey, with reservations by Myers as to 'collective' cases, or those where a 'phantasm' of a person dead, for a substantial time, conveyed information as to things happening after his death and lying outside the percipient's normal knowledge or inference. (It is convenient to describe knowledge so conveyed and cases in which it is conveyed as 'veridical', as is done in the Census of Hallucinations, though Myers in the glossary in *Human Personality* is less precise.)

Some proportion of veridical experiences were doubtless fortuitous as to their correspondence with external events. This proportion would vary according to the type of experience. For such of them as there was reason to suppose were not fortuitous the authors argued that they were in the main due to telepathic impulses subconsciously received by the percipient, which might be externalized as more or less realistic waking visions ('hallucinations' in the strict sense of the word, which does not imply any morbid mental condition), or form part of the content of a dream, or simply remain as an intuition or 'hunch'. The impulse would originate with a person (the 'agent') dying or recently dead, or victim of an accident, or in some other way taking the leading part in the drama of the experience. In many cases the impulse from the agent must be assumed to have been itself subconscious.

This view depended on the reality of telepathy, and on its power to project not only intuitions and dreams, but veridical hallucinations too. There was not at the date of the book much evidence, apart from what could be extracted from the cases themselves, for either of these things, and what there was, was not all of first-rate quality.

Phantasms of the Living contains an interesting controversy between Gurney and Myers as to collective experiences, the former explaining them by a complicated telepathic process, and the latter by an equally complicated process involving clairvoyance. Neither view has met with universal acceptance. Cases that are collective, veridical and of high evidential status have always been rare. This increases the difficulty of reaching a satisfactory explanation of them. Professor Hornell Hart's contribution to the problem (*Proc.* 50, Part 185) will be fresh in the minds of our readers.

An Appendix to the book gives a list of the serial numbers of the cases (882) discussed, the page reference, the initials of agent and percipient, their relationship to each other, and the nature of the experience. There is a brief tabular statement of the number and percentage of cases in each of the relationships listed from which it appears that in (roughly) 47 per cent there was some blood relationship between agent and percipient, in 42 per cent they were friends or acquaintances, in 6 per cent husband and wife, and in 4 per cent strangers. Of the percipients 58 per cent were women and 42 per cent men. Little attempt was made to enquire into the psychological motivation of individual cases, beyond what could be inferred from the nature and content of the experience and the relation between the parties as tabulated.

'Phantasms of the Dead' became the subject of a keen debate in Vols. III, V, VI and VIII of *Proceedings*, in which Mrs Sidgwick, Myers and Podmore took part. Mrs Sidgwick sums up the evidence then before the Society (*Proc.* III, 149: 1885) to this effect:

(a) Most apparitions of persons recently dead cannot be distinguished from subjective hallucinations. The cases where information has been conveyed are too few to exclude chance.

(b) There are no instances of single appearances months or years after death in which there are adequate grounds for attributing to the agency of the dead.

(c) There are numerous cases of similar apparitions seen in particular houses, and not apparently due to suggestion or expectation, but little evidence connecting the haunting with any definite dead person, and none to suggest the operation of any intelligent agency.

Myers was inclined to take a more positive view, which Podmore resolutely challenged.

It was generally felt in the Society that the number of cases surveyed in *Phantasms* was too small to justify the far-reaching conclusions of the authors, and that an enquiry on a much larger scale was desirable. In 1889 an International Congress of Experimental Psychology held at Paris entrusted the direction of such an enquiry to Henry Sidgwick, then President of the S.P.R. A committee was formed to conduct a 'Census of Hallucinations'. It reported in 1894, the report (*Proc. 10*) being mainly drawn up by Mrs Sidgwick and Miss Alice Johnson, both of whom have been trained in scientific method.

The first half of the report deals with the nature and origin of hallucinations in general, not only or mainly such as are veridical; their relation to other experiences, such as illusions, which to some degree resemble them; and the evidential difficulties which hamper the formulation of general principles regarding them.

The 'Census question' was as follows:

Have you ever, when believing yourself to be completely awake, had a vivid impression of seeing or being touched by a living being or inanimate object, or of hearing a voice; which impression, so far as you could discover, was not due to any external physical cause?

To this question 17,000 answers were received. It is to be noted that the Census Committee, unlike the authors of *Phantasms*, made no attempt to collect dream experiences.

The answers were classified in several tables, according to the sex of the percipient (women preponderating greatly) and their nationality; whether the experiences had been received shortly after waking or when the percipients were up, and if so whether they were out of doors; whether the experiences were visual, auditory, tactile or mixed; whether they were realistic or not; whether any persons seen were recognized, and if so whether they were living or dead; and so on.

From the mass of statistics set out in this part of the report, all of them relevant to the purpose of the enquiry, some figures are of special interest. The Census shewed that one in ten, roughly, of the persons answering the question, when believing themselves to be awake, had had a hallucination of one or more senses, and that about half of these experiences were realistic apparitions of human beings, living, dead or unrecognized.

In the second half (p. 207) the Committee proceeded, in their own words, 'to concentrate our attention on those [hallucinations] which appear to have a veridical character'. These they divided

into three classes: (1) those where the hallucination coincided in time with an external event in such a way as to suggest a causal connection between them; (2) those in which some information previously unknown to the percipient was conveyed to him, this class often overlapping with class (1); (3) 'collective' hallucinations not assignable to sensory suggestion from a common external source, or to suggestion from one percipient to another by word or gesture.

In order to ascertain whether there are veridical hallucinations which chance will not account for, we have to select a coincidence between two quite definite events, and see how often it would occur by chance, and how often it actually does occur (p. 208).

For this reason the Committee concentrated on 'death-coincidences', that is, apparitions occurring within twelve hours before or after the death, these limits being fixed for convenience of calculation. They had before them sixty-five first-hand accounts of such apparitions. After allowing for cases where they considered the collectors had been, or might have been, influenced by the knowledge that percipients had had experiences of this kind, and for cases that were known or estimated to be more than ten years old, or that were otherwise of poor quality, they reckoned that they had thirty-two first-hand accounts of death-coincidences occurring within ten years for which there was good evidence.

The Committee estimated that the number of recognized apparitions seen by persons answering the Census question since they were ten years old was 1,300. (The basis for this estimate will be found on pp. 63-5, 245-7 of *Proc.* 10.) At that time, according to the Registrar General's Report, the probability that any one person taken at random would die on a given day was about 1 in 19,000. 'Chance would . . . produce death-coincidences at the rate of 1 in 19,000 apparitions of recognized living persons,' whereas 32 in 1,300 was about 1 in 43, or 440 times the most probable number. This estimate is, of course, the final stage in a series of estimates, reached indeed by persons skilled in similar work in other branches of science, but incorporating some factors for which exact definition was impossible. The Committee had before them a large number of cases reported at first hand of collective hallucinations of different senses: there were 95 first-hand reports of collective visual hallucinations. They pointed out the doubts that affected many reports, where the evidence of only a single percipient could be obtained, as to whether the experience was really shared by anyone else, and that in other cases there were doubts whether the person or thing seen was not there in the ordinary sense. Most cases in which there seemed no doubt on either of these points

were purely subjective. There were, however, three reported death-coincidences (pp. 218, 227, and 230), the first thirty years old when reported, the second eleven, and the third twenty-two. The Committee (p. 393) did not present the collective cases as adding material support to the evidence for telepathy, but thought that, if telepathy were admitted as a *vera causa*, it afforded often the most probable explanation.

After making allowance for the special weaknesses affecting the evidence for 'local' apparitions, the Committee estimated that they had thirty instances that gave some evidence of not being purely subjective, but they had no strong reason for attributing any to the agency of the dead: (pp. 393, 394, 400). They observed that, taking phantasms of the living and the dead together, there was a marked accumulation of cases about the time of death, suggesting that there was no discontinuity at death, and they set out 'the isolated cases [repeat 'isolated'] which suggest the conveyance of information from the dead' (p. 394). They obviously did not regard spontaneous apparitions as giving any strong support to the argument for survival.

Whether poltergeists can properly be regarded as spontaneous phenomena may be open to doubt. They are in any case very different from the 'phantasms' dealt with in the two enquiries already mentioned. They were, however, the subject of a lively controversy, initiated by Podmore in *Proc.* 12, where he discussed all the poltergeist cases which had at that date been investigated by the Society, and advanced what has become known as the 'naughty little girl' theory of them. Andrew Lang and Barrett were his principal opponents.

To return to the 'phantasms', the next important document is Mrs Sidgwick's paper (*Proc.* 33, 1923) 'Phantasms of the Living'; an analysis of cases printed in the *Journal* since the book with that name was published. Some of the cases printed by the Society since that date were omitted, either as having been already published in *Proceedings* (the *Journal* was at that time issued privately), or because of defects of evidence. She discusses thirty cases which she calls 'experimental or semi-experimental' and one hundred and seventy spontaneous experiences, about a third of which were dreams. The Society's researches had by this time produced much more information as to paranormal cognition than was available to the authors of *Phantasms of the Living* (1886) or to the Census Committee (1894). The reports of the Piper sittings, and of the earlier sittings with Mrs Leonard, the automatic scripts of 'the S.P.R. group', and the experiments with Gilbert Murray had between them provided a much surer basis for distinguishing the

paranormal from the normal and the paranormal activities of the living from possible agency of the dead.

Most of the various types of experience included in *Phantasms of the Living* and the Census Report are represented in Mrs Sidgwick's collection. There are several collectively perceived apparitions, but none, I think, veridical. As to deliberate projection of a visual hallucination, she mentions that no cases had been reported to the Society since 1900. There are several reciprocal cases of interest, a type the rarity of which had led Gurney to doubt their genuineness. Two cases of reciprocal dreams discussed by Mrs Sidgwick she was 'disposed to regard as the fullest manifestations we have in the collection of telepathic communication', (p. 419). She looked on them as striking illustrations of the view of telepathy as being the transfusion rather than the transmission of thought, or at any rate of the former as being 'the type or norm of telepathic communication'.

From about this time (1923) there began a notable decline in the number of spontaneous experiences reported to the Society. The number of letters, however, received by the S.P.R. speakers who took part in the B.B.C. talks in 1934 suggests that the reason for the decline was that the sort of people with whom the Society was in close touch had diverted whatever interest they had in psychic phenomena to other lines of research, and that the Society had lost effective contact with the sections of the public for whom these experiences continued to be interesting.

Mention may, however, be made of the Chaffin Will Case (*Proc.* 36), which, if the facts may be accepted as reported, is an exceptionally striking case of a recurrent realistic apparition of a dead man, conveying by speech information outside the percipient's normal knowledge, i.e. the existence and whereabouts of his will.

A great revival of interest in spontaneous phenomena resulted from the International Conference promoted in 1953 in Utrecht by the Parapsychology Foundation, when the Society was entrusted with the organisation of another International Conference to discuss specifically phenomena of this type. This later Conference, which was also most generously supported by the Parapsychology Foundation, was held at Cambridge in July 1955 and was attended by, among other distinguished delegates, those from the Parapsychology Foundation, the American and British Societies for Psychical Research, and various European countries. The papers read at Cambridge touched on a great number of subjects. Reference was, for example, made to some points on which the traditional methods of research had not produced adequate evidence, in particular telepathic projection, and cases of collective perci-

pience, and above all the psychological motivation of spontaneous experiences. The need for more experiment was also stressed.

The Conference passed the following resolutions:

I

1. That this Conference approves in principle the preparation of an international plan looking towards better studies of spontaneous cases.

2. That the Conference urges upon the Society for Psychical Research, and the American Society for Psychical Research, the immediate development of a common plan for investigations in the English-speaking world.

3. That such a plan should comprise measures (a) for the discovery, careful sifting, authentication, and intensive study of a large number of cases, including recent cases; (b) for the development of hypotheses regarding the principles underlying them; (c) for the development of methods for testing hypotheses by experimental and other methods.

4. That representatives of parapsychology in non-English-speaking countries be urged to study the question of applying in their own countries, subject to such modifications as may be necessary, the plan recommended in Resolution 2 above.

5. That after a trial period of about a year, more or less, of redoubled activity in this field of investigation, proposals for an international plan for the study of spontaneous cases should be submitted to the Parapsychology Foundation.

II

That the Conference approves the nomination of a small International Committee, formed by one Member appointed by the Council of the S.P.R., one Member appointed by the Trustees of the A.S.P.R., M. Amadou, Dr Meier and Prof. Servadio, in order to examine:

1. Whether certain traditional methods of collecting, evaluating, and interpreting material, have a dependable parapsychological aim, and a good psychological, logical, and heuristic basis.

2. What implications for the future of parapsychology can be envisaged if such methods are accepted as reliable tools of parapsychological investigation.

The Committee is instructed to seek advice from the different national parapsychological organizations, and shall be free to consult any outstanding authority or expert as it should deem convenient. It should submit its conclusions to the Parapsychology Foundation within one year.

III

1. That the Conference urges the continuance of the programme of critical international correspondence on problems like 'ESP Projection', and its further development, with a view to clarifying agreements and issues on crucial points and to focusing attention on problems calling for decisive action.

2. That the device for rating the evidentiality of spontaneous cases, which has been developed and used in the International Project for ESP Projection, be further improved by international correspondence and by experiment, and be then considered in connection with the review recommended in Resolution I (3) above.

3. That plans be developed in detail and actual experiments be encouraged with a view to progress being made in the following fields: (a) recording and subsequent verification of dreams believed to show precognitive or other paranormal elements; (b) projection of one's own apparition by concentration of attention; (c) production of travelling clairvoyance by hypnosis; (d) inducing ESP projection by other means.

4. That plans be reciprocally reported and that results be so reported and published, subject to the necessary financial support being available.

IV

That an international 'follow-up' Committee be appointed to maintain international communications in this field of research, and to maintain contact with the Parapsychology Foundation, to which the parapsychological organizations in the countries represented on the Conference owe so much.

The Parapsychology Foundation most generously undertook to finance the enquiry.

Pursuant to these resolutions the Society got in touch with the American S.P.R., Mrs Goldney visiting the United States in 1956 for that purpose, and also with the International Committee for the Study of Spontaneous Paranormal Phenomena promoted by the Parapsychology Foundation with headquarters at The Hague and Mr G. Zorab as Secretary, with a view to organizing the plan 'looking forward to better studies of spontaneous cases' recommended in the first of the Cambridge resolutions. The Society's representatives also attended a meeting at Paris in 1956 of the Committee constituted by the second resolution. The Committee recommended that more attention should be given to cultural

anthropology, the role of *psi* functions in psychological activity considered normal, the physiological approach to *psi* phenomena and the possible physio-chemical factors bearing on them. The progress already achieved in 'psychoanalytic parapsychology' seemed to the Committee a guaranty of future advance.

The ground for initiating the enquiry having been thus prepared, the S.P.R. Committee compiled a simple questionnaire, corresponding closely to one drawn up by the American S.P.R. It was ready for distribution in September 1956. Copies were sent to various members of the Society who it was thought might be able to help in collecting cases, and, as announced in the *Journal* for that month, other members resident in the United Kingdom were invited to apply for copies. Information as to the intended Census was also given to the Press.

The intention was that all cases reported should first be screened. Those that seemed of interest should then be followed up with a view to verification along the lines traditionally followed by the Society's investigators, and when this stage had been completed, an enquiry into possible psychological motives should be made wherever there was reason to suppose that any special motive had operated beyond what was implied by the exercise of some form of paranormal faculty.